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Cinderella

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ROGER MITCHELL

CINDERELLA

I

When they found her prostrate in the garden,
talking to a beetle, they locked her in the loft.

There it was spiders. For them, she danced
and made strange noises in her throat.

Nothing could shame her. Tied to the hog trough,
she wallowed in mud and warm moonlight.

At dawn, a sow lay sleeping against her.
She hugged a tree, and they took her clothes away.

She tried to nurse a calf, so they killed it.
And then wiped their hands on her naked breasts.

She would leave all this someday. But for now
she kept to the barn, mooing in the stillness.

II

When she left, she put a tear in a sack
and left it by the back door. It was dawn.

The frog in her palm collected itself
and leapt over the gate.

She would leap like that if she had to.
She would be the fox if the dogs came near.

She followed the ant and the low shrub,
and carried a knife now to bite with.

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III

The sisters, naturally, were beautiful.
And, naturally, they were described otherwise.

She knocked on the back door, twice, begging for food.
They stared at her caked thighs, her ropey hair.

One of them threw her a shoe, the other
a cinder, and then watched as she choked them down.

They smiled their smiles in the right places,
but behind the barn they took cats apart.

The boys in the village, though, hung out their tongues
and dreamt. And some of them wept, and some cursed.

She was a broom dressed as a shawl, crouching.
Into her life crept nothing, breathing.

IV

He was not a prince. He was not even rich.
He was a woodcutter, and he drank.

There was no ball, there was no slipper,
and the clock had not yet been invented.

Someone else would think of these things:
the princes and the glass-like elegance,

the indoor bliss and the irreversible
severance from everything living,

the impossible, degrading splendor,
life in an up-thrust, thick-moated tower.

She wept at the woodcutter's death,
but dug the grave herself, the same day.

She never went back. She didn't need to.
Birds flittered over the new grass, the moles hummed.

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